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The Holiness Stream

Matthew 1:18-25; James 1:19-22

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This morning we focus upon the Holiness Stream of church history. Those congregations and denominations which have been part of this tradition focus upon the inward re-formation of the heart and the development of 'holy habits.'

The world doesn't place a great deal of emphasis upon holiness. It cramps our style. It restricts our freedom. Contemporary voices frequently emphasize the importance of keeping one's religious devotion a private matter, severed from public morality. Add to this the fact that our world often equates holiness with 'holier than thou,' and the challenge of affirming the contributions of the holiness tradition to Christian faith and life is all the greater. Yet, Christians are called to the pursuit of holiness. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm that we are to be holy because God is holy. The closer we get to God, the more like God we become.

Joseph is a good representative of this tradition because he was a righteous man who earnestly sought to do God's will, no matter what the cost. In this, holiness is the ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. You might have noticed - perhaps not - that the Gospels don't record any word spoken by Joseph. His actions matter more. And among his actions, his decision to reevaluate his concept of righteousness stands tall. Joseph had every reason to divorce Mary. The law was on his side. But God's message to Joseph made it clear that the baby Mary was carrying redefines righteousness. This transformation is what every believer experiences - Jesus redefines righteousness because he is himself the righteousness of God, who reveals God's holiness, models it perfectly, and invites us to participate in it.

James, the blood-brother of Jesus and author of the Epistle that bears his name, is another biblical example of the Holiness Stream. Contrary to popular opinion, the Epistle of James isn't a book about action. It's a book about the *source* of action, the heart of virtue. Even the most frequently quoted saying from the book - 'Faith without works is dead' - isn't about action. We don't respond to this verse by jumping up and doing some works for, you see, we can do all kinds of works without faith. No, James shows us how we can be hooked into a different kind of reality, a spiritual reality that in turn produces a different kind of person, which in the natural course of things produces a different kind of action. Forming this 'different kind of person' is the burden of James's Epistle and the reason he is such a moving example of the Holiness Tradition.

Different how? James shows us a person who can face trials of all kinds with rock-solid joy, a person who is plugged into a divine wisdom that sees 'bitter jealousy' and 'selfish ambition' for the impostors they truly are, a person who instinctively relates to all peoples on the basis of the 'royal law' of love, a person who out of divine resources is able to 'tame the tongue,' a person who eschews 'fightings and wars' because the inner wellspring of life is so purified that from it naturally flows blessing and not cursing.

James, you see, understands that what is on the inside of a person *will* come out. If the central core of who we are is 'earthly, unspiritual, devilish,' what flows out will be 'disorder and wickedness of every kind.' Conversely, if the central core of who we are is 'pure … peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy,' then what flows out will be a 'harvest of righteousness (which) is sown in peace for those who make peace.'

This is why James spends so much time and attention to *purifying* the source out of which all action flows. A divinely transformed heart, by its very nature, will produce right action. It simply cannot do otherwise. James says, 'Look at the action, and you will know the heart. Pure action, pure heart. Defiled action, defiled heart.' So he defines for us the kinds of actions a pure heart will do, and the kinds of actions a pure heart will not do. Purity of heart is the fountainhead of all right action.

As I said, holiness means the ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Virtue is good habits we can rely on to make our life work; vice is bad habits we can rely on to make our life not work, to make it dysfunctional, as we say these days. So a holy life is simply a life that works.

Holiness is not rules and regulations - if you elaborate lists of dos and don'ts you miss the point of a life hidden with God in Christ. No single standard of behavior is dictated by the word *holy*. All external legalisms fail to capture the heart of holy living and holy dying. On the other hand, holiness is sustained attention to the heart, the source of all action. It concerns itself with the core of the personality, the well-spring of behavior, the quintessence of the soul. Holiness is focused upon the formation and transformation of this center.

Holiness is not otherworldliness. Its life is not found by developing logic-tight compartments of things sacred and things secular. We do not come into holiness by studiously avoiding contact with our manifestly evil and broken world. No, holiness is world-affirming - the holy life is found smack in the middle of everyday life. We discover it while being freely and joyfully *in* the world without ever being *of* the world.

Holiness is not a consuming asceticism - it isn't a punishment for the sake of punishment. It neither despises nor depreciates the human body, and it never locates virtue or merit in ascetic exercises themselves. On the other hand, holiness is a bodily spirituality, affirming the goodness of the human body, seeking to bring it into working harmony with the spirit. So there are appropriate 'spiritual disciplines' for training the body and mind in right living.

This tradition, this stream within church history, seeks to have us engage in an ever deeper formation of the inner personality so as to reflect the glory and goodness of God; and it seeks to hold before us an ever more radiant conformity to the life and faith and desires and habits of Jesus. You see, the goal of the Christian life is not simply to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us!

The Holiness Stream argues with us, telling us that we are terribly prone to settle for less than what God desires for us. We are glad enough for God to remove an irritating behavior from our personality, or a destructive addiction, but it is a very different thing (we say) for him to begin restructuring our inner affections. We may be willing to give up honors and possessions and even friends, but it touches us too closely to disown ourselves.

The Holiness Stream focuses upon the heart, the well-spring of action. The great difficulty is winning the heart *to* God, and then, after conversion, keeping the heart *with* God. External actions are never the center of attention - they are the consequence, a natural result of something far deeper, far more profound. When the branch is truly integrated into the vine - united with the vine and receiving its life from the vine - then good spiritual fruit is a natural consequence. Action follows essence. The star tennis play consistently makes good shots precisely because she is a good tennis player. By sheer luck I might make a good shot, but that would not make me a good tennis player, as the shots before and after the lucky shot would amply prove.

Thus, to the pure *in heart*, virtue is easy - when the heart is purified by the action of the Holy Spirit, the most natural thing in the world is the virtuous thing. To the pure in heart, vice is what is hard. We are, very one of us, a tangled mass of motives - hope and fear, faith and doubt, simplicity and duplicity, honesty and falsity, openness and guile. God knows our heart better than we ever can. He is the only one who can separate the true from the false, and he alone can purify the motives of the heart. But he does not come uninvited. If chambers of our heart have never experienced the healing touch, perhaps it is because we have not welcomed the divine scrutiny.

The Holiness Stream gives us hope for genuine progress in character transformation. This hope is a grace-filled gift, for there are many people who have simply given up on any movement forward in the spiritual life, or have chosen to define it as unimportant. But, you see, the salvation that is in Jesus Christ isn't limited to the forgiveness of sins - it is also able to break sin's power.

So the Holiness Tradition provides us with tough-minded, practical ways to train body, mind and spirit. It does so through the means of what are called 'spiritual disciplines.' These 'disciplines' are the well-recognized activities of prayer, meditation, study, fasting, solitude, service, worship, celebration, and much more. These are the activities by which we quite literally present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12) to God.

Let me be clear. Spiritual Disciplines are a seeking after the righteousness of the kingdom of God through indirection. By undertaking Disciplines of the spiritual life that we *can* do, we receive from God the ability to do things that under our own steam we simply *cannot* do, such as loving our enemies. The Disciplines place us into the divine stream of things in such a way that God is able to build, within us, deeply ingrained habits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We are invited to work in cooperation with God, by using these Disciplines.

If you would enter into the Holiness Stream, I give you these words for the journey. *First*, train. Remember the principle of indirection - don't tackle the issues of virtue and vice head-on, but discover and use the Spiritual Disciplines, which will in turn stimulate your growth in grace. *Second*, invite others to travel the journey with you. Such persons become both companions and mentors who provide you with discernment, counsel and encouragement. Third, when you stumble and fall, get up and start again. Appropriate confession and restitution are always in order, but we have in Jesus a perfect friend who will never leave us, and we are in this for the long term. And, stumbling is part of our growing. We learn that by starting again and again and again something firm and lasting is being built in us. The old writers called this something 'fortitude,' and fortitude builds habits, and habits build character, and character builds destiny.

What is the Holiness Tradition? It is a life that functions as it should. Why should we explore it? Because through it we are enabled to live whole, functional lives in a dysfunctional world. And by doing *that*, our little reflection of the light of Jesus might lead others all the more fully to see him who is the light of the world.

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